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Is Germany Approaching the Abyss?

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I ALWAYS wonder into how much detail the prophecies and criticisms of a foreigner may go. I pretend to no deep knowledge of Germany. I knew Berlin a little before the war and early in this year I spent some very interesting weeks in several of the German cities. I can only venture to record certain salient facts about the mental and physical condition of the people.

The complete defeat of Germany and the final failure of the military machine and all the disillusion and misery of the war left the German people with their old outlook destroyed. They overthrew their rulers. They began the process of self-scrutiny. They were prepared for a hard, just peace. The hero of the world to them was President Wilson, whose proclamations of principle were the antithesis of the policy of their Junkers, represented a new faith in humanity and law unknown to Bismarck, required of the German militarists utter humiliation, and of the whole nation the abandonment of some territory and all conquering ambitions. For all this the common German people were prepared. Nor was it after all so strange to them. The immense Social Democratic party had always been anti-militarist and international. Though only a section—as in France and Britain—had resisted the fury of patriotic war-fever, its soul was always international. Now given facts enforced its theories. The middle mass of less thoughtful Germans became also haters of war. This was the greatest fact about the new German neutrality, the fact dis-

regarded at Versailles, the great lost opportunity of the Big Four who undertook to remould the world in secret conclave. This is the tremendous “might have been”—a patently regenerated people, voluntarily disarming itself, pacific by repentance, ready to pay large compensation for the ruthlessness of their late rulers, industrious to rebuild their broken prosperity, the very prop of the new order in the new age.

This spirit is not lost but it is damped, diverted and discouraged by despair and starvation. There has not been any answering echo in the ruling forces of the Allied nations. I have talked with scores of active-minded men in Germany, who held before the war every kind of creed from faith in monarchy to revolutionary socialism. They all proclaim the one great wonder which affects them all, the shock of disillusion and despair which the Treaty of Versailles brought to this changed people, anxious to try the new faith of humanity instead of overweening and selfish materialism. The cruelty of the starvation blockade enforced with worse than war rigour during the armistice, the betrayal of the faith of the Allies in abandoning President Wilson's fourteen points when they had insured disarmament by promising them, the total indifference to the principle of self-determination in reconstructing Europe, the deliberate policy of destruction of the economic structure of the defeated states—all this was the Allied response to Germany turning towards the light. At every stage during the war they

had been told that the German people were not the real enemy, that a German people showing by its acts repentance or abjuration of the policy of its rulers would be gladly received into the comity of nations. The German people overthrew their rulers, they abandoned their arms, they were revising their constitution into a form far more democratic than those of their conquerors. Their reward was that the German workers, their wives and their children should begin the peace era by two years of starvation arranged by the cold-blooded calculation of statesmen. No wonder that Mr. Keynes in his book, which reveals the policy of Versailles with a sterner exposure than any German could accord it, calls it a "Carthaginian Peace." There is only this difference between the treatment of Carthage by Rome after the second Punic War and its modern counterpart. Then both sides expected that defeat would mean for the defeated nation destruction, starvation, ruin and vengeance. There was no President Wilson to proclaim justice to conquered and conqueror alike, no doctrine of the world being made safe for democracy. The Big Four of Versailles had the glory denied to Scipio and Cato of murdering the hopes vivid in the minds of millions when they broke their faith and decreed their peace of revenge, starvation and territorial plunder.

The first principal effect in Germany of the Versailles policy was to encourage the revival of the discredited and hated military party. The believers in human justice had been proved wrong. What was the use of faith in international right? The Junkers after all could claim to have been right in saying that nothing except superior force could give the German people a chance of survival against the jealous encircling nations. So the hopes of the

military party again began to rise and their activities and intrigue to increase. But the new spirit in Germany had gone too deep to exhaust itself so soon. The Kapp-Lüttwitz enterprise came to a rapid and disgraceful end. For the whole of the workingmen of Germany, moderate or extreme, were determined not to come again under the yoke of the old masters. There was a universal strike, applauded and supported by the greater part of the middle class—at least the German people were proved to be decisively against the old militarism.

I was indeed struck by another remarkable feature, the small amount of bitterness towards most of their late enemies by the German people. This is no doubt partly attributable to the fact that in Germany, where the war was more evidently to the mass of the people a war of self-defence than in America and Britain where it was preached by the governments as a crusade, there had not been so elaborate and continuous a cult of atrocities and race hatred during the war. But the post-war friendliness of the German to English and Americans betokens more than that. For weeks I went about in Germany in trains and tram-cars, talking openly wherever I went either English or German so badly as to instantly reveal my nationality. Never once did I see a sour look or hear a word of discourtesy. The Germans have put the past behind them, with the war hatreds and national classifications of clean and unclean.

But the strain of the present situation on this new and better mentality is so great that it would be impossible to calculate on its permanence unless a change of attitude manifests itself in the Allied governments. The policy of starvation can only lead in the end to revulsion and revenge. Starvation

is the chief fact in Germany today. Vienna is known to be starving. It has not been respectable, however, to tell in the English newspapers the same truth about the German cities. I do not know how it has been in America. Yet on the cessation of this condition depends the stability of Central Europe.

Some travellers in Germany see only the surface and come home describing the gaiety and luxury of Berlin. It is true enough that money flows fast in the big hotels and the central shop streets of Berlin, where the foreign speculators and the native profiteers gather, and plunder, and spend. They can buy even at the post-war prices which range from ten to twenty times the pre-war standard. Meals in the Berlin restaurants cost eight times what they did before the war. Ninety-five per cent of the population cannot afford these prices and has to live on its rationed quantities of worse and cheaper food. This year in most German cities the ration has fallen as low as in the worst days of the war. The standard which modern medical science declares is requisite for the maintenance of the average worker is 3,000 calories a day. In German cities the ration has for some months been little more than one-third of this recognized standard. Milk, butter, fats have been unknown to the mass of the people. And this is no new condition. It is famine on the top of years of want which has lowered the stamina and sapped the moral force of the people. It is not only the working class who are starving. The middle class is no better off. Professors, teachers, officials and all the immense range of persons living on fixed incomes find they can barely buy the ration and afford anything more. Many of the students at the universities are subsisting on one meal

a day. New clothes are a luxury beyond the means of all these people. Many dare not open their coats for they have only their skin beneath them. Nursing mothers have no baby linen, and new-born children of respectable parents have to be wrapped in newspapers. Tuberculosis is making fearful strides. It cannot be combated in the hospitals, for even there there is no food to strengthen the sufferers. They are just able to die in kindly surroundings. Child mortality is increasing painfully, and the generation which is rising now will be permanently enfeebled if it survives at all. Perhaps, worse than among more primitive folk, is starvation of a civilized people, as their power of organization and resistance prolongs the agony for them.

Unless a new sane policy of economic reconstruction sweeps away entirely the vindictive indemnities, the coal tribute and the military occupation, the industrial populations of Germany are bound to perish or to make some desperate effort at self-preservation in the near future. That effort may take one of two forms. It may be a furious and despairing outburst against their economic oppressors, but I think that far less likely than an internal revolution oversetting and recasting society, as in Russia. Society in Germany is far more complicated and stable than in Czarist Russia, but the value of the existing order is ceasing to be obvious to the masses of Germans who obtain from it neither food, clothing nor security. The middle classes who are the real supporters of capitalist and landowning society have become now a black-coated proletariat. When the black coats are worn out, as they nearly are, they will be liable to make common cause with the workingmen, who by that time will be almost all revolutionary from despair. The only quite safe prophecy

is that the present situation will not last much longer. Ten million industrial Germans must find a livelihood or perish. Whatever form their uprising

takes it will be terrible and very unpleasant to the shortsighted and unimaginative rulers of the victorious Allies.